

**Gemma Browne**

**Lily White**

Adolescence itself is a flirt with artifice, a kind of staged narrative. Felix Guttari spoke of adolescence as a revolution, linking the onset of puberty to perceptive mutations, which relate to space, body and time. It is a crisis time that beaks up and disorganizes the psychological and behavioural status quo, a threat to the semiotic world of adults.<sup>1</sup> Adolescence can be seen as a set of behaviours and images, set up in order to contain and commodify it, as if it could be made to last forever.

Gemma Browne's new body of work, *Lily White*, captures the freshness, innocence and possibilities of youth. She refers to *Lily White* as something pure, irreproachable, and clean. Made up of composites of images of teenagers from fashion magazines, the images strive to conjure a world of youth and its endless possibilities and optimism.

Adolescence and its cultures have always been celebrated in contemporary culture, and more than ever in recent years. The businesses of advertising and media have always presented the world of youth as an ideal state, re-affirming the preconceived ideals and promises of youth. These have more to do with the predetermined cultural constructs that determine image, behaviour and attitudes, rather than the reality of adolescence. We are culturally obsessed with youth and all its associations. Adulthood is no longer a desirable state. Aging can be paused and deferred. Who wants to be old?

The trappings of youth, and by that I mean music, fashion, image, television and other associations have been embraced and adopted by the previous generation. The teenage soap opera is discussed by the water cooler in the office. The next music star is made famous and successful by the thirty and forty somethings and their constant search for the next elusive download. The high street is full of adults wearing the same clothes as their teenage neighbours, same stuff, different generation. The MySpace generation can't rebel, they've nothing to rebel against.

Today's stars are barely out of their teens. The youthful antics of a teenage starlet make headline news. Role model for young fans? – Hard when you're barely out of your teens. Youth has never been so embraced and so celebrated and so reviled when the boundaries are crossed. Similarly, our culture celebrates youthful appearance. Age is something to be ignored or admonished. Cosmetic surgery is highly acceptable, even encouraged, anything to slow down the inevitability of aging. The image of female has never been so at odds with feminism of the past decades. Young women are encouraged to embrace their inner "girlie" and shake it into the boardroom.

In her essay Teenage Art Manifesto, Rachel Howe discusses the advent of adolescence as subject in art: "Teenage art is not an attempt to reclaim youth after it is passed, but an effort to expose the dishonesty of the adult experience, which is best served by reviving the emotional

and psychological convictions of teenage hood".<sup>2</sup> I would tend to disagree somewhat with this argument, rather that there is something inherently attractive in the possibility of continually living your experiences with the freshness of the first time. This forms the basis for much art that deals with youth and adolescence. Teenage art embraces images that emulate the previous generations concerns, as if to join or confirm something perceived as attractive or desirable, for example the need for freedom of expression and thought, the need to create a decisive and conscious identity. The modes of expression change, the ideals do not. Images seem to celebrate the artifice of adolescence, a culturally constructed entity as to what youth should be.

Browne's practice sits comfortably in current international trends of art dealing with youth and femininity. Parallels can be easily made with the work of Elizabeth Peyton, Karen Kliminck and Stella Vine, all painters who use images from contemporary media as the source of their work. These fleeting and artificial images are familiar and generic permeating through media and advertising. The rendering of these images in paint lends a warmth and humanity that is missing from their original references. Similarly, many artists working in lens based work deal with young femininity, more successfully Rineke Dijkstra, Lauren Greenfield, Jock Sturges and to a lesser extent, Vanessa Beecroft whose subjects are more mature.

Previous bodies of Browne's work have touched on these themes, in particular *Being Pretty is Everything* (2002) and *Sugar Coated* (2003), especially themes of feminine beauty, using paint to create a series of arresting images that questions our notions of our culturally constructed ideals of what constitutes beauty. Browne constructed images that are almost confrontational. The women portrayed seem to actively engage with the viewer, with eyes that stare directly from the canvas. These images exude a wide-eyed sexuality, a defiant self-awareness and self-knowledge of their attractiveness as defined by cultural constructs.

The more recent work, the *Twinkle* series (2005), took influence from popular culture and images from animation, in particular the manga cartoon and Japanese contemporary art. The subjects in this series are subtly different from the previous work, using a uniform head and shoulders approach, yet portraying doll like images. These images allude to the fashion dolls of childhood, heavily styled and doe like. These dolls allude to a more innocent childhood, a gentler era, an allusion that features strongly in *Lily White*.

Nostalgia figures strongly in *Lily White*. Gemma Browne refers to the work as an attempt to capture the freshness and possibilities of youth, especially those of teenage girls, who represent a particular optimism for the future. Browne refers to the whiteness and blue skies as a way of conjuring up summer, holidays and carefree times.

Again, employing her composition technique of portraying the head and shoulders of the subjects, this work is a series of images of young teenage girls on bright blue backgrounds. The slightly smiling girls

exude innocence and childlike quality, a self-assuredness and confidence that one does not usually associate with those so young. They seem to come from a gentler era and are without the quiet anxiety and unease that can be associated with our culture's notions of youth.

The use of colour is particularly important in this work. The vivid blue backgrounds are reminiscent of endless warm summers, of happier times full of possibility, pregnant with hope and optimism. Similarly, the use of soft candy colours, for example soft blue and pinks and the prevalence of white, can be associated with childhood and also, fashions of previous eras. The clothes that these girls wear are from today, yet highly influenced by the 1980's with graphic prints, dots and chunky plastic jewelry. Fashion has always borrowed from the past, yet not as obviously as these images show. It's as if fashion seeks to recreate a past childhood by replicating a certain look and it's associated freshness.

Similarities can be seen in each of the works, lending a certain uniformity to the work. Each girl differs slightly, a different outfit, a different smile yet all possess the semblance of innocence of youth. Yet, behind the smiles, there is a knowingness, a confidence, it's as if each of these girls understand the territory and the qualities of youth. Girls have seen images of a million other girls in the pages of magazines. The individual loses her qualities, her fixed identity within the crowd, conforming to type. They adhere to the codes of behaviour, the rules are unbroken.

Browne does not present the teenage world as an ideal. She merely visually articulates certain admirable qualities that this world evokes. There is no judgement on the adult world or on the teenage world. The teenage world is not presented as something best reclaimed or relived, but by merely evoking both nostalgia and positive qualities of youth, we question our adult aims and beliefs, perhaps wishing for more carefree times. Teenage art, or art that has teenagers as its subject, is not a way of exposing adulthood, but, merely a way of articulating and remembering the more positive qualities of soon-forgotten youth.

## **Ruth Carroll**

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Guttari and Christian Poslianec, "The Adolescent Revolution", in *Soft Subversions*, Semiotext(e), 1996

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Howe, *Teenage Art Manifesto*, K48, New York, 2004